

# Wang Daiyu 王岱輿 (1570-1660) on the Non-Ultimate (*wuji* 无极) and the Great-Ultimate (*taiji* 太极): an Islamic Makeover

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## Abstract

Scholars have written much about the Catholic missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and his attempts to make Christianity and Confucianism palatable to each other. Yet, although Muslim communities have a long-established presence in China, we know little about the philosophical system that blended Islam and Confucianism in the heart-minds of Chinese Muslims. A careful search into the history of Chinese philosophy reveals a rich, fascinating, but hitherto understudied philosophical tradition indigenous to China, the Han-Kitab 汉克塔布(a Chinese-Arabic compound literally meaning “the Chinese books”). In this groundbreaking project, I set out to investigate the creationist theory developed by Wang Daiyu, the earliest and one of the most influential figures in the Han-Kitab. My central undertaking is to provide a systematic analysis of Wang’s appropriation of two neo-Confucian concepts to articulate a creationist account of the origin of being: the Non-Ultimate and the Great-Ultimate. My analysis shows the two Ultimates in Wang’s system are quite different in nature from their neo-Confucian counterparts. Deeply influenced by Sufism, Wang’s ontology features an emanative structure, offering us a distinct model of the Ultimates -- a hitherto underappreciated feature of the history of Chinese metaphysics.

**Keywords:** Wang Daiyu; the Non-Ultimate; the Great-Ultimate; Chinese Islamic philosophy; creationism; emanationism

## Introduction

While analytic philosophers have recently become more receptive to both Islamic and Chinese philosophy, Chinese Islamic philosophy remains an understudied sub-field. An important reason for this lack of interest is that the current narrative in the history of Chinese philosophy largely neglects the role of Islamic thinkers in the development of the Chinese philosophical tradition.

This project is inspired by an important new trend in philosophy: acknowledging that the historiography of philosophy unjustly ignores many non-canonical figures. Many ulama, from the founding figure, Wang Daiyu, in the sixteenth century to Liu Zhi in the nineteenth century, played a significant role in a distinctively Chinese Islamic tradition. Moreover, they contributed some of the most innovative ideas to the larger Chinese philosophical tradition by articulating a genuine Islamic worldview that would appeal to Confucian-educated Muslims. In this paper, I am going to investigate one of such contributions made by Wang Daiyu.

Wang is the author of the first Islamic classic in Chinese, *Commentary on the True Teaching* (*zhengjiao zhenquan* 正教真詮), which is published in 1642, two years earlier than Descartes' *Principle of Philosophy* (1644). From theological themes like the nature of God ('the Real One'), the original beginning, predetermination, and freedom, to Confucian ones like rituals, filial piety, and true friendship, Wang covers a wide range of topics from metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, to moral psychology in this work. However, it is in his posthumously published treatise, *Great Learning of the Pure and Real* (*qingzhen daxue* 清真大学) that we find the most systematic presentation of his philosophical views. As Murata (2020, 69) points out, since Zengzi's 曾子 *Great Learning* is one of the four foundational texts in the Confucian philosophical tradition, by naming his work 'Great Learning', Wang intends it to have a similar status in Chinese Islamic thinking. In the present study, we shall use Wang's *Great Learning* as the primary text to analyze his conception of the two Ultimates.

I will proceed as follows. In Section 1, I will analyze how Wang perceives himself as 'the opener of the field' of Chinese Islamic philosophy. While this self-image tends to go unnoticed, I argue that it is key for recognizing Wang's conception of Islam as a distinct and autonomous source of answers to key philosophical questions. In Section 2, I will juxtapose two distinct models of the Ultimates, those of Zhou Dunyi (1017-73 CE) and of Zhu Xi (1130-1200 CE), arguing that the terms 'the Non-Ultimate' and 'the Great-Ultimate' pick out different referents in their respective systems. In Section 3, I will argue that in Wang's system, the Great-Ultimate is the secondary emanative effect of the Non-Ultimate, which is identified with the Muhammadan Reality, the created origin by God of myriad things. My study shows that Zhou Dunyi, Zhu Xi, and Wang each contribute a distinct conception of the

Ultimates. In so doing, Wang adds a fresh perspective and a bold, Islamic voice to a discourse that is often interpreted as predominantly nontheistic.

## 1. Wang Daiyu's Project

While the Han-Kitab remains a relatively under-studied text within the broader history of Chinese philosophy, historians began studying the distinctive activities and remarkable productivity of the Chinese-Muslim scholarly community as early as the late nineteenth century. In his ground-breaking research on the scholarly community of Chinese Muslims during the Ming Dynasty, Benite (2005) records that Archimandrite Palladius (Pytor Ivanovich Kafarov; 1817–78), an early Russian sinologist, was the first Western to study the Han-Kitab systematically. On Palladius' view, the collective aim of the Han-Kitab authors was to 'expand their coreligionists' knowledge of Islam and to proselytize Islam to the Chinese, particularly in response to the recent missionary activities of the Jesuits' (Benite 2005, 116). Palladius' assessment was based on his observation that, concurrent with the burgeoning scholarship of Chinese Muslim literati, there was a growing Jesuit presence in the social, political, and scholarly spheres in Ming China. However, by focusing on the historical development of Chinese Muslim scholarly community, Benite reaches a different conclusion. Unlike the Jesuits' goal, the aim of Han-Kitab authors was not to convert non-Muslim Chinese to their religion and way of life. Rather, they aimed to cultivate, expand, and transmit a body of knowledge that was, as Benite articulates it beautifully, 'not simply Muslim but *distinctively Chinese Muslim*' (118, my emphasis).

The current study is inspired by Benite's verdict. Chinese philosophical traditions and Islam developed in relative isolation from each other. Although Islam was present in China as early as the Tang dynasty (618-907CE), the texts that would constitute the Han-Kitab were not written until about a millennium later. For philosophers interested in dialogues between drastically different philosophical traditions, the Han-Kitab tradition is of tremendous value.

In this section, I aim to answer the following question: how did Wang characterize, design, and motivate his philosophical project that was 'distinctively Chinese Muslim'? To answer this question, it would be best to begin with Wang's prefatory remarks in the *Real Commentary*, his first original published work. Knowing that the fundamentals of Islam would be unfamiliar to his readers, many of whom were fellow Chinese Muslims born and raised in the predominantly Confucian society, Wang prefaces his philosophical discussion with a lengthy note about why he undertook the project, how he situated Islam with respect to Confucianism, and what he aspired to accomplish. This note contains important

information about Wang's philosophical orientation, which will help our interpretive purposes later, so a careful reading of it is worthwhile:

My ancestor was a native of *Tianfan*.<sup>1</sup> ... For three hundred years my ancestors became habituated to the customs of this land [China]. *I trace back the roots and investigate the origins so that I will not venture to forget them.*

I did not study the Confucian learning at a young age. By the time I became an adult, I could read the [Chinese] language only roughly, no more than for purposes of social intercourse and letter writing. When I reached the prime of life I was ashamed of my simple and rustic knowledge. I began to read the books on Nature and Principle and the histories, reading widely in the writings of the scholars of the various schools. When I penetrated a little into the general meaning of those books, I became aware that their arguments are strange and their ways different and mutually contradictory. *If I measure them in terms of Islam, the differences and distinctions are like those between heaven and earth.*

Regardless of my ability, I dared use my words to clarify the utmost principle. ... Someone also said that the books of Islam are seldom seen by Confucians. My book is incomplete, so perhaps later scholars of noble aspiration will add to it, expanding on the teachings and going further. So I will probably be *the opener of the field*. (Murata 2000, 36–37, my emphasis)

Wang is quite emphatic about his situation as an Islamic philosopher in a foreign land, one in which his people had long settled and to which they had 'habituated'. Three layers of his remarks are particularly philosophically salient. First, rather than a Chinese philosophical tradition, Islam anchors Wang's philosophy. In particular, Wang often expresses disapproval of Daoism and Buddhism and, on one occasion, even charges Buddha and Laozi as 'the ancestors of emptiness and nonbeing' (*Great Learning*, 109). Indeed, to stress the extent to which the Islamic way differs from the Chinese traditions, Wang likens their differences and distinctions to 'those between heaven and earth'. The obvious goal of his project, then, is to expose some of these key differences.

While Wang's proclamation is clear, it may seem surprising: a survey of his works reveals that he frequently uses concepts from Confucianism, sometimes even from Daoism and Buddhism. One prime example of such borrowing is in his account of creation, which is the main subject of the present paper. To explain how God creates the cosmos, Wang deploys three concepts – the Non-Ultimate, Great Ultimate, and Human Ultimate – that are

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<sup>1</sup> Tianfang 天方 literally means the direction of heaven; Wang often uses this phrase for Mecca and the region of Arabia. For more discussion of the use of this phrase, see Murata (2000, 25).

distinctive of and central to the naturalistic, neo-Confucian account of the origin of the cosmos. To what extent, then, might Wang's theory of the Ultimates differ from neo-Confucian accounts? Is the heaven-and-earth rhetoric nothing more than hyperbole, or is it simply inapplicable to this particular borrowing?

Second, Wang's way of singling out 'the books of Principle and Nature' indicates that he understands neo-Confucian metaphysics as a rival theory.<sup>2</sup> In the *Commentary*, Wang critically engages the metaphysical views of several representatives of the neo-Confucian school, particularly the Cheng Brothers, Cheng Hao (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi (1033–1107), and Zhu Xi (1130–1200). There, he voices disagreement about the neo-Confucian conception of the Ultimates. However, not until his later treatise, the *Great Learning*, does Wang offer a full-fledged account of the Ultimates. As I will argue in Sections 2 and 3, even though Wang seems to appropriate the neo-Confucian Ultimates as a foundation for his view about the origin of existence, he transforms the meaning of these concepts. Wang's innovation here remains underappreciated. However, once acknowledged, one will no longer be surprised by his invocation of differences 'like those of heaven-and-earth'.

Third, Wang characterizes himself as 'the opener of the field'. So, he clearly perceives his project as the start of a new philosophical path. Moreover, he sets a second task to chart territory that future generations of scholars could expand and build on. Wang does not name the field he opened, so commentators have an interesting question to ponder: what should we call Wang's way such that our label best reflects his vision? In light of Benite's neat phrase 'distinctively Chinese Muslim', my proposal is that we should call the field that Wang understands himself as creating *Chinese Islamic philosophy*. Not only is the field distinct from other Chinese philosophical schools, but it is also highly autonomous insofar as it has its own conceptual resources, framework, basic commitments, and a well-marked scholarly community. This does not mean that Wang and his fellow Muslim philosophers ignore central, philosophical problems of neo-Confucian and Daoist works. Rather, 'autonomous' stresses the extent to which Chinese Islamic philosophy, at least as Wang conceived, stands out as a program that defines its own goals and problems.

One might object that we are attributing Wang too much credit as the first Chinese Islamic philosopher. Authors often exaggerate their achievements by inappropriately amplifying their self-image. I agree that when analytically trained philosophers confront such claims, they ought to test them against concrete textual evidence. Indeed, a survey of his works suggest the opposite of his grandiose vision: much of Wang's metaphysical

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<sup>2</sup> As is well known, neo-Confucianism (also known as Song-Ming Confucianism, or *xingli zhi xue* 性理之学, the study of Principle and Nature) was a major philosophical movement initiated by Confucians during the Song dynasty that continued well beyond Wang's lifetime. A defining feature of this movement is its construction of a robust metaphysical system that they believed was compatible with the central tenets expressed in pre-Qin Confucian texts, which focused more on ethics, moral psychology, and political philosophy. Hence the labels 'neo-Confucianism' and 'classical Confucianism'. For more discussion on the historical development of neo-Confucianism, see Tiwald (2020).

theorizing is clothed in neo-Confucian terminology, an indication that he is more indebted to Chinese philosophy than he admits.

However, given the state of literature on Wang, say, compared with that on a neo-Confucian figure, it would be more fruitful to treat Wang's claim as a working hypothesis rather than as merely self-promotion. We can then test his claim by analyzing Wang's views alongside those of his rivals to see whether evidence supports it. As I argue in Sections 2 and 3, Wang has indeed contributed a distinctively Islamic construal of the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate, a contribution that is completely novel for Chinese, Muslim or non-Muslim, philosophy. If my reconstruction is successful, we will have some evidence for Wang's claim.

My approach to Wang's texts emphasizes how his system is autonomous and distinct from, rather than dependent on, non-Islamic Chinese philosophical schools. This approach might strike one as diverging from the approach of Murata, who understands the relationship that Wang perceives between himself and neo-Confucians as more germane to the question about Wang's originality. She writes:

The fact that Wang's discussion employs terminology drawn largely from Neo-Confucianism shows that he felt it to be the most adequate of the Chinese traditions to explain the nature of things. He does not explicitly criticize Neo-Confucian metaphysics, though he does criticize, in the *Great Learning* and elsewhere, Buddhist and Taoist concepts, and these critiques are in fact quite similar to those made by the Neo-Confucians. (Murata 2000, 72)

It is true that Wang's use of Confucian terminology is notable. However, contrary to Murata, Wang expresses disapproval numerous times about neo-Confucian metaphysics, especially in his first work the *Commentary*. For instance, in criticizing the neo-Confucian adherence to the Book of Changes [*Yijing* 易经] in their theorizing, Wang remarks that 'there are no firm principles' that the neo-Confucians succeed in finding and, to strengthen his case, examines Zhu Xi's interpretation of a *Yijing* verse (*Commentary*, 80). On another occasion, he complains that 'the people of the world do not comprehend the original beginning of the creative transformation' and then explicitly singles out neo-Confucian concepts of *li* (usually translated as 'Principle') and *qi* (as 'Vital energy') as examples of inadequate theories (*Commentary*, 49).<sup>3</sup> Although I cannot offer a thorough examination of Wang's engagement with neo-Confucianism here, the two instances suffice to show that Wang is more critical of neo-Confucian metaphysics than Murata suggests. More importantly, Wang must be aware that neo-Confucians made notable contributions to the problems of

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<sup>3</sup> The literature on the neo-Confucian metaphysics of Principle and Vital Energy, especially that propounded by Zhu Xi, abounds. Like many of his fellow scholars, Wang demonstrates a familiarity with Zhu Xi's metaphysical views. For a systematic survey of the historical development of and philosophical issues surrounding Zhu Xi's theorizing about the Principle and Vital Energy, see Chen (1988).

Principle and Nature and of human nature. His singling out their treatment of these issues indicates that his disagreement with neo-Confucians runs deep, even though he employs their terminology to theorize about Islam.

A more accurate picture of Wang's general attitude toward the three Chinese philosophical schools is that, although Wang remains critical of all three, he is more disapproving of Daoism and Buddhism. The fact that he employs neo-Confucian terminology does not imply Murata's claim that he 'felt it to be the most adequate of the Chinese traditions to explain the nature of things'. Rather, he may have used neo-Confucian terms for pragmatic reasons. In response to why he quotes so much from Daoism and Buddhism, Wang responds:

There is nothing lacking in the classical canon of Islam, but there is no one outside the teaching who knows this. This is because our languages are different. I wrote and discussed using their expressions precisely to make our teachings comprehensive. *All the borrowed expressions I used were because of my concern to show how the principles work.* The expressions do not carry the same meaning, but if I had not borrowed them, how could I make clear that these two doctrines are different from ours? (*Commentary*, 39, my emphasis)

Although Wang discusses expressions or terminology that he borrowed from Daoism and Buddhism, I think the same holds for neo-Confucian terminology. Wang's employment of neo-Confucian terminology is primarily pedagogical: to present and communicate Islamic ideas easier. Yet behind the use of these neo-Confucian terms, Wang disagrees deeply about the meaning of many key terms. Wang's employment of the neo-Confucian Ultimates is a perfect example of such disagreement. A comparative analysis is now in order.

## 2. Neo-Confucians on the Ultimates

While the notions of the Ultimates figure prominently in neo-Confucian metaphysics, neo-Confucians did not reach consensus about the Ultimates. In fact, not all neo-Confucian had a view about the Ultimates. The Ultimates begin to have a significant – albeit controversial – role to play in neo-Confucian metaphysics through the work of Zhu Xi.<sup>4</sup> In this section, I will juxtapose two distinct models of the Ultimates, those of Zhou Dunyi (1017–73 CE) and of Zhu Xi. There are two reasons for this choice. First, Wang mentions Zhu Xi multiple occasions, and so must be familiar with Zhu's views. Second, the ultimate goal of my study

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<sup>4</sup> Zhu Xi's most celebrated adversary on issues related to the Ultimates is another towering figure in the philosophical community at the time, Lu Jiuyuan 陆九渊 (1139-1192), also known as Master Xiangshan. Lu questions the attribution of *Taijitu shuo* 太极图说 to Zhou Dunyi as the text displays a clear Daoist influence. For more discussion on the Zhu-Lu controversy over the Ultimates, see Kong (2015).

is to show that Wang contributes a distinct conception of the Ultimates. Given this goal, it helps to see that, even though Zhu Xi claimed to derive his ideas from Zhou Dunyi, the two in fact contributed two very distinct models of the Ultimates. If my argument is correct, then, Zhou Dunyi, Zhu Xi, and Wang each contribute a distinct conception of the Ultimates – a hitherto underappreciated feature of the history of Chinese metaphysics.

The first, joint appearance of the three Ultimates is found in Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu shuo* 太极图说. The text consists of a diagram called *taijitu* 太极图, which means 'diagram of the Great Ultimate', and an accompanying commentary that explains the diagram. Although the commentary comprises only 256 Chinese characters, it has spawned a rich literature. According to Robin Wang, 'of all the Song philosophers Zhou Dunyi produced the least yet caused the most commentaries of all' (2014, 314). To focus the discussion, I will set aside the Human Ultimate and examine the nature of and relation between the other two Ultimates, the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate, so that I can show the extent to which the views of Zhou Dunyi, Zhu Xi, and Wang diverge from each other. About these two Ultimates, Zhou Dunyi writes:

The Non-Ultimate (*wuji* 无极) and (er) the Great Ultimate (*taiji* 太极)!<sup>5</sup> The Great Ultimate moves therefore generates *yang*, when movement reaches its extreme, it generates rest. Rest generates *yin*. When rest reaches its extreme, it will return to motion. Motion and rest alternate and become the root of each other. Thus the distinction between *yin* and *yang* is made and two forms (*liangyi*) are established. The transformation of *yang* with the unity of *yin* generate water, fire, wood, metal, and soil. As these five forces (*wuqi*) are diffused harmoniously the four seasons run their course. The five elements are one *yinyang*. *Yinyang* is the one Great Ultimate. The Great Ultimate comes from (*ben*) the Non-Ultimate. (Wang 2005, 314)

In this passage, Zhou describes five successive states in the cosmogenic process. Although Zhou does not specify the nature of the Non-Ultimate, Robin Wang has identified a Daoist influence on Zhou's thinking and traces the origin of the notion of the Non-Ultimate to Lao Zi's phrase in *Daodejing*: 'returning to *wuji* (the Non-Ultimate)'. Moreover, the Laozist Non-Ultimate is 'an inchoate state' of the cosmos that is 'without limit or defining boundaries' (2005, 316). Given this Daoist influence, Zhou's Non-Ultimate means the 'unconditional beginning of the universe' where no differentiation has occurred and, in virtue of the enactment of the Great Ultimate, differentiation of *yin* and *yang* takes place. The Non-Ultimate is the primordial state of the cosmos in which no differentiation obtains, and following that state is the state of the Great Ultimate in which differentiation starts to arise:

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<sup>5</sup> Scholars diverge greatly in how to translate *wuji* and *taiji* into English. The translation cited here is Robin Wang's, who renders *wuji* and *taiji* as 'ultimate void' and 'the supreme ultimate', respectively. To maintain consistency, I modified her terminology to accord with Murata's translation. Wang (2005) is also a great source for the philosophical history of Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu shuo*.



first the *yin* and *yang*, then the two forms, the five elements, and eventually the myriad things. The text is ambiguous about the exact nature of the relation between the two Ultimates, however. Although the text suggests that the Great Ultimate *arises from* the Non-Ultimate in some metaphysically loaded sense (e.g., ontic dependence), there is insufficient textual evidence to determine that the relation between the two is anything stronger than temporal succession. In summary, in Zhou's model, the Non-Ultimate and Great Ultimate are both cosmogonic states in which the former precedes the latter temporally.

Interestingly, however, this reading is very different from the one that Zhu Xi endorsed and popularized. Historically, Zhu Xi elevated Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu shuo* as a foundational text in Chinese metaphysics, thereby making the latter an important figure in the neo-Confucian tradition – Zhou Dunyi never identified as a Confucian himself. While Zhu Xi appropriates the three Ultimates from Zhou Dunyi, he conceives of them in a radically different way such that he provides another model of the Ultimates.

Before examining Zhu Xi's reconceptualizing of the Ultimates, it is worth discussing his motivation for doing so. Because Zhou Dunyi is deeply influenced by Daoism, it is not surprising that his cosmogonic picture aligns with the Daoist idea that being comes from non-being in some mysterious way. However, Zhu Xi argues against a Daoist metaphysics. From a strategic point of view, then, Zhu Xi wants to minimize the Daoist elements in his conception of the Non-Ultimate and to attribute less 'heavy-lifting' to the Non-Ultimate. Thus, Zhu Xi provides us with yet another model of the Ultimates. He writes:

The carryings-on of Heaven<sup>6</sup> has neither sound nor smell, and yet it is the pivot (*shuniu*) of the actual process of generation (*zaohua*) and the root of things. Thus it [Zhou Dunyi's *Taijitu shuo*] says 'the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate'. It is not that there is the Non-Ultimate outside of the Great Ultimate.<sup>7</sup>

Here, Zhu Xi offers his understanding of the first sentence of *Taijitu shuo*: Zhou Dunyi does not mean to say that the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate are two distinct items. Rather, he proposes that we ought to understand the term 'the Non-Ultimate' as denoting a feature of that which carries the above heaven. Insofar as that which carries the Heaven is beyond the grasp of senses, we say that it is Non-Ultimate. Correspondingly, the term 'the Great Ultimate' denotes another feature of the same reality. Insofar as it is the pivot of the actual process of generation and the root of things, we say that it is the Great Ultimate. On Zhu Xi's construal, we are conceptualizing different features of the same reality by using

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<sup>6</sup> The corresponding Chinese is '上天之载' (*shangtian zhi zai*). It is a common phrase in Confucian texts. The *shangtian* can be translated as 'High Heaven' or 'Heaven Above'; the *zhi* is a generative. Participle, and *zai* can be a verb 'to carry or transport' or a noun 'carrier or transporter'.

<sup>7</sup> Translation mine. See *Taijitu shuojie* 太极图说解。

different terms.<sup>8</sup> Whatever ‘carries’ the above heaven transcends the phenomenal world and is itself bereft of any phenomenal qualities, such as sound and smell; this aspect is named ‘Non-Ultimate’. At the same time, it is also responsible for what occurs in the phenomenal world insofar as it is the ‘pivot’ of things and ‘origin’ of their existence; this aspect is named ‘Great Ultimate’.

Clearly, for Zhu Xi, the Non-Ultimate is not a distinct state, let alone the primordial state, of the cosmogonic process, as it is for Zhou Dunyi. Zhu Xi treats the Non-Ultimate as one aspect of the metaphysical reality that carries the above heaven. For brevity, I call this ‘the carrier’ and I will return to the sense in which this reality ‘carries’ the Heaven. For now, the question is: if these two Ultimates are merely two distinct aspects of the same reality, why does Zhou Dunyi present the Great Ultimate as succeeding the Non-Ultimate? As discussed above, Zhou Dunyi appears to offer a cosmogony, which specifies five ordered states in the coming-into-being of the universe. Nowhere in his presentation does a third item – which Zhu Xi refers to with the phrase ‘the carryings-on of Heaven’ – come up. If we accept Zhu Xi’s interpretation, how are we to understand his commentary? In response to these questions, Zhu writes:

The first sentence of *Taijitu shuo* is received with the most criticism. However, what the critics do not see is that if Zhou Dunyi does not speak of the Non-Ultimate, then the Great Ultimate will be identical with things, and fall short of being their origin; if he does not speak of the Great Ultimate, then the Non-Ultimate falls into emptiness and hence cannot be the origin of things.<sup>9</sup>

Lao convincingly argues that Zhu Xi is here offering an explanation to puzzles that arise in his interpretation of Zhou Dunyi (2019, 98). In particular, Zhu Xi’s point is that, in writing ‘the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate’, Zhou does not posit two distinct cosmogonic states or some other entities. Rather, he means to preempt two kinds of misunderstanding about the metaphysical carrier. First, Zhu Xi reasons that if Zhou Dunyi left out the Non-Ultimate and spoke only about the Great Ultimate, one might be inclined to think that the carrier inhabits the same level of reality that the myriad things do. However, this cannot obtain because, by supposition, the carrier is their origin insofar as it determines their operation and existence. Hence, we need a word to designate the transcendent aspect for the carrier. Second, if Zhou Dunyi left out the Great Ultimate and only spoke only about the Non-Ultimate, one might be inclined to think that the carrier is simply nonbeing – but how could nonbeing, as Daoists would have it, be the origin of being? In summary, Zhu Xi holds that, to keep both the transcendent and generative aspects of the carrier in view, Zhou

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<sup>8</sup> On this point I diverge from Lao (2019, 98), according to which the two Ultimates are two distinct ontic features (the transcendent and the generative), as opposed to epistemic ones, of the same metaphysical reality.

<sup>9</sup> Translation mine. See *Zhuzi wenji* 朱子文集, Vol. XXXVI, ‘A Reply to Lu Jiuzhao’ 答梭山书。

Dunyi designates them with a correlative pair, the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate. Although, in the *Taijitu shuo*, Zhou Dunyi presents the two Ultimates as if they exist in successive order, Zhu Xi holds that the relation is significantly different from that of temporal succession: they are two distinct but intimately related aspects of the carrier, which is the metaphysical grounding of Zhu's system.

As is well known, Zhu Xi ultimately identifies this carrier with *li*, or Principle, the ordering principle that explains the operation of Vital Energy (*qi*) and the existence of the myriad things. Moreover, Zhu Xi maintains that Principle just is the Great Ultimate. All of these further complicate the problem of specifying the exact relation between the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate because, to do so, we need to understand the relation between Principle and Vital Energy, which will take us too far afield.<sup>10</sup> So, instead, I end this section by summarizing the differences between Zhou Dunyi's and Zhu Xi's models of the Ultimates:

1. Kinds of theory: Zhou Dunyi offers a cosmogony, which specifies four distinct temporally ordered states in the coming-into-being of the universe; Zhu Xi develops a metaphysics that attempts to explain the existence and operation of things in the phenomenal world.
2. Levels of reality: in Zhou Dunyi's text there is no indication that he intends to distinguish different ontological levels; in Zhu Xi's commentary, he singles out 'the carrier' as the ground of the existence and operation of the myriad things.
3. Kinds of relation: Zhou Dunyi maintains that the relation between the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate is one of temporal succession, but he never explains how the former gives rise to the latter. Zhu Xi insists that these two are more intimately connected – they are two distinct ways to conceptualize the same ordering Principle, which underlies the existence and operation of things in the phenomenal world.

If my analysis is correct, Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi offer two very distinct models of the Ultimates. Not only do the terms 'the Non-Ultimate' and 'the Great Ultimate' pick out different referents in their respective systems, Zhu Xi and Zhou Dunyi also differ fundamentally on the kind of projects they pursued. Strictly speaking, Zhu Xi inherits only the terminology of the Ultimates from Zhou Dunyi because his interpretation of Zhou Dunyi's text is heavily 'ontologized', so to speak, because he has a different goal. Likewise, as I argue in the next section, Wang Daiyu borrowed expressions or terminology from neo-

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<sup>10</sup> For a preliminary discussion of the complexity of the issues pertaining to the relation between *li* and *qi*, on the one hand, and its implications for the relation between the Non-Ultimate and the Great-Ultimate, see Tiwald (2020). Also see Yang (2012) for a more detailed discussion of this problem in light of the controversies over the two Ultimates following the publication of Zhu Xi's *Taijitu shuojie*.

Confucians ‘do not carry the same meaning’ (*Commentary*, 39). I now turn to Wang’s treatment of the two Ultimates.

### 3. Wang’s Contribution: An Islamic Makeover

In Section 1 I maintained that Wang likened the distinctions between Islam and Confucianism to those ‘between heaven and earth’. In Section 2, we discussed Zhou Dunyi’s cosmogonic conception of the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate and contrast it with Zhu Xi’s. Already Zhou and Zhu offer two very different models of the Ultimates. This shows that even philosophers we typically identify as ‘neo-Confucians’ did not offer unanimous answers regarding the nature and relation of the Ultimates. Underlying their disagreement, among other things, is a difference in the philosophical projects they each pursue. Zhu is less interested in cosmogony than is Zhou because Zhu wants to ‘fit’ the Ultimates into his ontology in which *li* is the metaphysical ground. So, before examining Wang’s views, we ought to ask: what is the goal of his conception of the Ultimates?

As is well known, the Abrahamic religions are united in the belief that a necessarily existing, omnipotent, and supremely merciful God created everything. Wang’s philosophy is rooted in Islam, so he is bound by the commitment that God is the ultimate ground of existence. In this regard, he faced a challenge similar to the one his contemporary Matteo Ricci faced: of constructing a creationist account in terms that a Confucian-educated audience would understand. An important theme in Ricci’s exchange with his contemporary Confucians is the thesis that the Great Ultimate is created by God and is hence *not* the ultimate ground of existence. Setting aside the issue of whether Ricci’s argumentation is successful, consider his fairly straightforward strategy: he denies the privileged status of the Great Ultimate as the ultimate ground of existence without disrupting other elements of the Confucian ontology. In other words, Ricci’s goal is to help the Confucians recognize God as ontologically prior to the Great Ultimate.<sup>11</sup>

In comparison, Wang’s goal is more demanding because Wang and his fellow Chinese Islamic philosophers are committed to Sufism, which has an unusual account of creation. To begin to appreciate its unusualness, consider the Sufi notion of Muhammadan Reality, which is also known as Muhammadan Spirit or Muhammadan Light.<sup>12</sup> According to Morrissey (2020, 97)

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<sup>11</sup> See Bays (2011) for more discussion for the history of Catholic missionary in China. For more on Ricci’s critical engagement with Confucians on the origin of being and his failure to convince them of it with scholastic arguments, see He (1998).

<sup>12</sup> Murata (2020) helpfully points out that the ground of Wang’s philosophy is theoretical Sufism, and that the primary source of influence is the school Ibn al-‘Arabi’. The notion of Muhammadan Reality plays a significant role in Ibn al-‘Arabi’s system. For more discussion on Ibn al-‘Arabi’s treatment of it, see Chittick (2019) and Morrissey (2020), Chapter 10.

[...] in Ibn 'Arabian thought, the basic idea associated with this concept is that Muhammad existed as a cosmic reality – the Muhammadan Reality – prior to the creation of the phenomenal world. Indeed, according to Ibn 'Arabī, the Muhammadan Reality was the first thing to receive phenomenal existence, and it was from the Muhammadan Reality, moreover, that the rest of the phenomenal world drew its existence. (Morrissey 2020, 97)

In other words, the Muhammadan Reality is the first existence God creates, and it is *through* this first existent that all things receive existence in turn. Since Wang's conceptions of the Non-Ultimate and the Great-Ultimate are embedded in this creationist account, it is no surprise that the Muhammadan Reality figures importantly in his theorizing about the Ultimates. In the remainder of this section, I assess how Wang imports the notion of the Muhammadan Reality into his framework and, thereby, offers yet another, distinct conception of the two Ultimates. Wang introduces us to the Non-Ultimate in the *Great Learning*:

What we call the Numerical One is the one root of the ten thousand different things and the chief summit of the Powerful Being. It also is called by different names – the Chief Servant, the Originally Honored, the Special Envoy, the Representative, the Great Pen, the Original Beginning, the Chief Mandate, the Great Wisdom, the Ocean of Nature, the Human Ultimate, the Great Father, the Fountainhead of the Tao, the Great Root, the Light of Clarity, the Spiritual Taproot, the Utmost Sage. The names are different, but the principle is one at root. It is within the Powerful Being, accepts the mandate, and becomes manifest. It is the root origin of the ten thousand things and thereby carries ten thousand principles. *It is the Non-Ultimate.* (93, my emphasis)

Here Wang enumerates a host of different designations of the same metaphysical reality, the Numerical One. Wang thinks it is of utmost importance to distinguish between the Real One (*duyi*), the agent who creates the origin of the myriad things, and the Numerical One (*shuyi*), the created origin of the myriad things (84).<sup>13</sup> In other words, Wang's ontology has three distinct levels of existence: God the creator (the Real One), the created origin of myriad things (the Numerical One), and myriad things. The Numerical One depends on the Real One for its existence in a very specific sense: the former comes into existence only when mandated by the latter. Moreover, the Numerical One's very existence is endowed with various duties that are reflected in the names of the myriad things. While examining

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, consider Wang's claim: 'The most important thing in the Pure and Real is that you divide clearly between the Real Lord and the Chief Servant' (84).

Wang's views on the relationship between the Real One and the Numerical One is outside the scope of this paper, I would like to note two details in the passage.

First, Wang identifies the Numerical One with the Non-Ultimate. Since the Numerical One and the Non-Ultimate are really identical, all the names suitable to designate the Numerical One are names of the Non-Ultimate too. Second, notice that 'the Great Pen' and 'the Utmost Sage' are among these names. In the preface to her translation of Wang's *Great Learning*, Murata remarks that this is evidence that Wang likely has in mind the notion of the Muhammadan Reality when he writes about the Non-Ultimate (2000, 75). Indeed, a careful search of one of Wang's Sufi source books, *Path of God's Bondsman: From Origin to Return* by Najm al-Dīn Rāzī (d. 1256), supports this correspondence.<sup>14</sup> In the following passage, for instance, identifies 'the Pen' with the Pure Spirit and Light of Mohhammad – Muhammadan Reality:

There is a strange and subtle truth which now occurs to us. The Prophet, upon whom be peace and blessing, said: '*The first that God created was the Pen; the first that God created was the intelligence; the first that God created was my spirit*'. ...When he said, 'the first that God created was the Pen,' the Pen intended is not an ordinary human pen, but the Pen of God, a pen befitting His might and glory, and *identical with the pure Spirit and Light of Mohhammad*. (Algar 2003, 69)

Given that Wang inherits his framework from Sufi texts, such as the *Path*, we can infer a preliminary position about the nature of the Non-Ultimate: It is the first existence that God creates, the singular origin through which the myriad things are created; it is the Pen of God, the Muhammadan Reality.

What about the Great Ultimate? In his *Great Learning*, Wang tells us that there are 'three levels of bearing witness to it [the Non-Ultimate]: as the Originally Honored, the Representative, and the Scribe'. He then goes on to identify the Scribe with the Great Ultimate:

What we call 'the Scribe' is the surplus of the Pure Essence, and it is the naturally issuing disclosure to the outside. It also is called by different names – *the Function of the Numerical One*, the Bond of the Ten Thousand Forms, the Taproot of Heaven and Earth, the Mother of the Ten Thousand Things, the Scribe, the Ocean of Images. *This is the Great Ultimate*. At this moment the vital-energy becomes prosperous while the principle stays concealed. It is what the Taoists say – '*The Named is*

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<sup>14</sup> I obtained this important piece of information from Murata (2017, 4). Murata notes that although the books translated from Persian and Arabic into Chinese before the twentieth century still remains a critical question for future research. However, she also stresses that of the translated texts available, the *Path* is most certainly one of Wang's sources.

*the mother of the ten thousand things.*' The Great Ultimate transforms and enacts *yin* and *yang*. (*Great Learning*, 94, my emphasis)

Many of the names listed here form a correlative pair with those that Wang attributes to the Non-Ultimate: the Great Pen and the Scribe, the Great Father and the Mother of Ten Thousand Things, the Ocean of Nature and the Ocean of Images. Moreover, Wang writes that the Great Ultimate is 'the Function of the Numerical One' (i.e., the Function of the Non-Ultimate). So, its relation to the Non-Ultimate is key for understanding the nature of the Great Ultimate. Moreover, Wang appeals to the neo-Confucian metaphysical category of function (the Function of the Numerical One) and a famous line of Laozi's *Daodejing* (The Named is the mother of the ten thousand things) to express his idea about the nature of the Great Ultimate. In view of these connections, one might be inclined to understand Wang's conception of the Great Ultimate either through the neo-Confucian distinction between substance and function or the Daoist view about the unnamed origin and the named origin of things. To my mind, however, there are three reasons why we should resist this interpretive strategy.

First, as with their understandings of Ultimates, substance (*ti*) and function (*yong*) do not have univocal meanings in neo-Confucianism. Moreover, Wang does not provide any textual support for which sense of these terms he adopt. The same holds for the Daoist terminology of 'the unnamed' and 'the named'.<sup>15</sup> Second, as pointed out in Section 1, one important reason for Wang's choice of Chinese philosophical terms is to communicate with his audience, who are well versed in the Chinese language and philosophies, and to help them better understand Islamic ideas. Just as Zhou Dunyi and Zhu Xi do, Wang endows the same terms with very different meanings. Finally, note that, for Wang, the Great Ultimate is the *yong* (function) of the Non-Ultimate, but the Non-Ultimate (which corresponds to the Muhammadan Reality) is a metaphysical reality that has *no* counterpart in any other strand of Chinese philosophy. While there are similarities between the features neo-Confucians and Daoists attribute to their ontologically privileged items (i.e., Principle and *wu*, the unnamed origin of heaven and earth) and those Wang attributes to the Muhammadan Reality, their philosophically interesting points emerge in their differences. So, to ensure that the similarities do not overshadow their differences, I won't appeal to *tiyong* or other neo-Confucian and Daoist resources to explain Wang's account of the Ultimates.

Wang uses a fair amount of emanative language in his discussions about the nature of God's creation or, to use own term, 'transformative creation' (*zaohua* 造化).<sup>16</sup> That Wang

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, Yang points out that Zhu deploys the notions *ti* and *yong* differently: to speak about a thing's possibilities as opposed to the actualization of one such possibility, a thing's end or purpose and the manifestation of it, or a thing's present state as opposed to its future states (2000, 67). For a discussion of Zhu Xi's different conceptions of *ti* and *yong* in different stages of his career, see Gedalecia (1974). For discussion on Laozi's distinction and connection between 'the named' and 'the unnamed', see Zheng (2008).

<sup>16</sup> In traditional Chinese thought, *zaohua* signifies the generation and change of the myriad things, but these changes do not imply that a creator or agent is responsible for the generation and change.

upholds a theory of creation by emanation is unsurprising, given that he is deeply influenced by Sufi texts. Sufism, in turn, is known for having a Neoplatonist framework and emanationism is a distinct feature of Neoplatonism.<sup>17</sup> Consider the following passages, which contain emanative language:

[1] There are six names for this bounded realm [of Powerful Being]: the One Root of the Real Foundation, the Head of the Four Oceans, the Root Act, the Transforming Fountainhead, the Powerful Being, and the Surplus Light. (*Great Learning*, 94)

[2] The Real One and Powerful Being are like the root substance of light and the shining of light. The root substance of light is such that when you go near it, you will be transformed. If you share in the shining of light, you will become capacious. (*Great Learning*, 101)

[3] The clear brightness is not the same as the shining; but without the shining, how can there be the clear brightness? The shining is not the same as the sun; but without the sun, how will there be shining? In general, all the levels rely on this clarity; otherwise, nothing at all has the ability to act. (*Great Learning*, 102)

[4] Power is to Being as clarity is to light. The Utmost Sage, who is the Numerical One, is like an ancient mirror, and each of the sages and groups of worthies are attendants in waiting. (*Great Learning*, 104)

I introduced these passages to demonstrate that Wang theorizes about creation within an emanative framework.<sup>18</sup> I will argue that that Wang understand the relation between the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate as one of emanative creation.

While there are many variants of emanative creation within the Islamic tradition, they usually agree about two basic tenets. First, the myriad things in the phenomenal world emerged from God, the absolute Unity, in successive stages in such a way that ‘one stage functions as the creative function of the next’ (Wildberg 2016). Second, insofar as absolute Unity occupies the highest place in the hierarchy of being, it is more ‘real’ than and ontologically prior to all other beings. Consider passage [3]. Wang points out that, given the phenomenon of the shining sun, we can distinguish several distinct existents: the Sun is a

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<sup>17</sup> Although I translate *zaohua* as ‘transformative creation’, it must note that in traditional Chinese thought, *zaohua* signifies the generation and change of the myriad things, but these changes do not imply that a creator or agent is responsible for the generation and change.

<sup>18</sup> Some elements of these passages might seem utterly strange: How does one ‘go near’ the substance of light and become transformed by it? Why does Wang describe the Utmost Sage (i.e., Muhammad) as ‘an ancient mirror’ while the other prophets and sages are ‘attendants in waiting’? While these are likely the most immediate questions engendered by the quoted passages, their answers are already addressed in the religious scholarship. See, for instance, Murata & Chittick (1994), especially Part II.



heavenly object; the shining is the Sun's activity; and the clear brightness is the physical quality of the shining. In this particular case, the physical quality derives its existence from the activity, which in turn derives its existence from the object. In emanative terms, one would say that the shining is the Sun's emanative effect, which in turn serves as the emanative cause for the clear brightness. The emanative chain proceeds indefinitely – the clear brightness must be the emanative cause of other items. In the example, the Sun is the most 'real' and ontologically privileged insofar as the other items in this emanative chain derive their existence from it, either immediately or mediately. With the basic picture in mind, let us now turn to the details.

Wang's *Great Learning* is structured into three main chapters, titled 'the Real One', 'the Numerical One', and 'the Embodied One'. The first two chapters mainly deal with the metaphysics of God and the Muhammadan Reality, the first existence He creates. The third chapter is about epistemology: how do we know or 'bear witness to' God and the Muhammadan Reality that the first two chapters describe? The two metaphysical chapters are structured similarly: each consists of three sub-chapters that explore a distinct level (three in total) in which God and the Muhammadan Reality exist.

Although, our primary aim is to understand the relation between the Muhammadan Reality (i.e., the Non-Ultimate) and the third level in which it exists, *the Scribe* (i.e., the Great Ultimate), we should first explore the ontological relation between the distinct levels of the Real One. This will be helpful because the three levels in each of the two chapters are structurally parallel; we can then then apply it to the Numerical One.

God, the Real One, exists at three distinct levels: *benran* 本然, *benfen* 本分, and *benwe* 本为. Murata translates the three Chinese terms as 'the Root Nature', 'the Root Allotment', and 'the Root Act', respectively. While the meanings of the first and third phrases seem straightforward – they indicate God's nature and the ways in which he acts – *benfen* is worth discussing. What is it to talk about God, the absolute Unity, in terms like *allotment*? Wang replies:

Know that before the being of heaven and earth, the Real Lord wanted to manifest His own original power. So, with His original knowledge, He prearranged the ten thousand things for appropriate use, along with their beginnings and their ends, their insides and their outsides, with nothing surplus or lacking, and with no change or alteration. So, nothing is outside the wanting and acting of His knowledge and power. It is not that His knowledge and power constrict the ten thousand things, only that the ten thousand things cannot transgress these two. (*Great Learning*, 90)

The subchapter opens with 'What we call the 'Root Allotment' is the movement and quietude of the Root Nature' Together, the passages shed light on what this middle level amounts to: the first emanative effect of the absolute Unity. That is, God manifests to

Himself by way of perceiving the content of His Consciousness – His Will to manifest the original powers and Knowledge of all things prior to giving them existence. Ontologically, then, the Root Allotment depends on the Root Nature in two very specific ways: it is both the first emanative effect of the Root Nature and the emanative effect that obtains as the self-manifestation of the Root Nature. Similarly, the Root Act is to the Root Allotment as the Root Allotment is to Root Nature. The three are successive of each other in the emanative chain: The Root Act is the immediate emanative effect of the Root Allotment, as well as its manifestation. For instance, the Sun’s physical constitution is analogous to the Root Nature, the nuclear activity internal to the Sun is analogous to the Root Allotment, and the shining of the Sun is analogous to the Root Act. This triad constitutes an open-ended chain of emanation: the first manifestation of the Sun’s physical constitution is its emanative effect, (i.e., the internal nuclear activity); the internal activity, in turn, manifests itself as the outward activity of shining, which causes further emanative effects (e.g., heat). The further along the emanative chain, the more dissimilar the item will be to the first item. Nonetheless, no matter how far down the chain, the item remains, to a greater or lesser degree, a ‘watered-down’ version of the first item in the chain. After all, in an emanative model, every item other than the absolute Unity is ontologically derivative thereof.

Now, we can apply this model to the Numerical One to help us understand the relationships between its three distinct levels, which Wang designates as ‘the Originally Honored’, ‘the Representative’, and ‘the Scribe’. Wang writes:

The One that possesses all the principles is called ‘Numerical One.’ The Powerful Being is not differentiated from the Real One and the Numerical One. The Powerful Being is rooted in the Real One, and the Numerical One is manifest in the Powerful Being. (*Great Learning*, 102)

That is, Wang holds that the relation between the Numerical One and the Powerful Being (another name Wang uses for the Root Act) is identical to the relation between the Root Act and the Root Allotment. Wang maintains that the relations are identical because, in Wang’s ontology, the Numerical One occupies immediately follows Root act in the emanative chain. In other words, the Numerical One receives emanation directly from the Root Act and thereby acquires its existence. Thus, Wang says that the Numerical One is ‘rooted in the Real One’ and ‘manifest in the Powerful Being’. On the whole, then, the Numerical One is the secondary emanative effect of the Root Nature.

Moreover, the Numerical One has a similar structure to the Real One. Wang calls these three distinct levels ‘the Originally Honored’, ‘the Representative’, and ‘the Scribe’. We can understand the relation between the three as (almost) parallel to that between the Root Nature, Root Allotment, and Root Act – ‘almost’ because the Originally Honored, which is the essential nature of the Numerical One, is entirely constituted by the emanation it

receives from the Root Act. Yet this is not true of the Root Nature because it occupies the first place in its emanative chain.

Now, let us return to how Wang understands the relation between the Non-Ultimate and the Great Ultimate. Recall that 'the Non-Ultimate' denotes 'the Numerical One' and 'the Great Ultimate' denotes 'the Scribe', its 'third level' metaphysical reality. Typically, scribes are appointed to make written copies of documents and this duty has passive and active aspects. On the one hand, unlike authors, scribes reproduce content. On the other hand, scribes also do the writing. Wang chooses 'Scribe' to convey similar ideas. Within an emanative scheme, the Scribe has a similar two-fold status. On the one hand, the Scribe receives the emanative cause of and exists as the emanative effect of the Representative, which is 'representative' insofar as it receives the Divine Will and Knowledge from the Root Act. On the other hand, the Scribe also occupies grants existence to *yin* and *yang*, which in turn emanates the existence of the myriad things: 'the scribe of the Great Ultimate transforms and enacts *yin* and *yang*; and the ten thousand images are sketches of *yin* and *yang*' (*Great Learning*, 95).

In summary, Wang understands the relation between the Non-Ultimate and the Great-Ultimate such that the latter is the secondary emanative effect of the former (just as the Root Act is the secondary emanative effect of the Root Nature). This is a very different metaphysical relation from how Zhou Dunyi or Zhu Xi conceive of the relation between the Non-Ultimate and Great Ultimate. Therefore, Wang contributes another model of the two Ultimates to the history of Chinese metaphysics, one that shares some terminology with the neo-Confucian models but remains conceptually dissimilar to them.